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ABSTRACT

As part of a larger, ongoing study, this research examined how Australian boys' early school leaving may be linked to boys' decision-making processes and regional discourses of masculinities. Interviews with 22 boys from three locations (provincial, metropolitan, and rural) in Queensland indicated that commonalities existed across the transcripts of the non-completers. There was a disparity between boys' ideal schooling constructions and their experienced schooling reality. There was a common theme of disaffiliation with school and the perceived negative impact of teachers on boys' school experiences. Some boys often remarked on an unwillingness to accept the strictures, constraints, and disciplines of school, and a number discussed how school failed to provide relevance and meaning. Taking up employment opportunities outside of school provided an opportunity and a legitimate excuse to leave school. Most boys felt that entering the work place allowed them to regain control over their lives and their individual decision-making processes. They seemed to share a view that leaving school and getting a "real" job provided an advantageous head-start for their future. They claimed they were able to learn practical, real skills that could be applied directly to their current employment requirements. However, for the majority of boys, the reality of being employed conflicted with their initial construction of paid work, and some boys indicated feelings of regret at leaving school when they did. (Contains 41 references.) (TD)

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Boys' Voices of Non-Completion of Secondary School

Ingrid Harrington

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Boys' voices of non-completion of secondary school.

Considerable attention has been given in recent years to problems of retention and early school leaving in Australian schools, and the factors influencing students to leave school early. For reasons to be elaborated later, there has been a particular concern for issues associated with the retention of boys. A further consideration is the extent to which these issues are influenced by local cultures that might create regional differences in the ways that these factors play out. This paper reports initial findings from a study that addresses these questions.

A plethora of research has been conducted into the area of boys' school retention and associated factors (Ball and Lamb, 2001; Collins et al. 2000; Connell, 1995a; Dwyer, 1996, Epstein et al. 1998; Gilbert and Gilbert, 1998; Poole, 1986; Teese et al. 1995). The apparent retention rate (ARR)[1] to Year 12 in Australian schools indicates that in 2001, 23.25% of females and 35.2% of males left school before completing Year 12 (House of Representatives, 2002). It is this gender disparity that has focused attention on the retention of boys. This paper does not wish to suggest that increasing the retention of girls is also not an important issue. Indeed, evidence about student post-school experience illustrates that Year 12 completion is more important for girls than for boys in its effects on employment and income (Collins et al. 2000). However, it is still the case that boys' education is being curtailed to an extent that is a justifiable cause for concern, and that its connection with the construction of masculinity warrants particular scrutiny.

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Lamb et al. (2000) point out that due to social and economic changes over the past 20 years, students have been forced to rethink the value of pursuing an education as there are likely to be future disadvantages for students who do not maximize their educational opportunities. Research suggests that boys and girls who decide to leave school early form an 'exposed' category of young people and that non-completers are likely to become the most vulnerable to economic and social change (Collins et al. 2000; Gilbert and Gilbert, 1998; House of Representatives, 2002; Lamb et al. 2000).

Ball and Lamb (2001) found that boys who are more likely to be 'at risk' of early school leaving demonstrated low school achievement, attend government schools, live in rural or remote areas with a low socio-economic status, are of Indigenous origin, and/or have parents who did not complete school and who were born in Australia or another English-speaking country.

A recent study by King (1999) outlines more specifically the individual costs associated with students who leave school. The study conservatively estimated the cost to the nation of early school leaving to be in the vicinity of $2.6 billion a year, if costs to the government and the rest of society (as well as individual costs) are included in the estimates.

An aspect of the study is the exploration of the role of masculinity in the decision making process of boys who leave school early, and to understand how the

construction of masculine identities links to the discursive resources available to boys contemplating leaving school.

The study also incorporates a regional focus, to investigate how the larger issues of gender play out in local contexts. West (1993) defines gender as the 'local management of conduct in relation to normative conceptions of attitudes and activities that are appropriate for particular sex categories' (p. 64). She concludes that:

> Reconceptualising gender as an accomplishment that is ongoing in interaction means that we must locate its emergence in specific social situations, rather than in the individual or some loosely defined set of role explanations.
> (West, 1993, p. 64)

The construction of gender is likely to vary according to the specific local assumptions and social practices in a particular cultural context. It follows then that the construction of masculinities and masculine identity will also depend on the specific local assumptions of gender within a geographical location. As this paper reports 'work in progress' from the initial stages of analysis, it does not claim to link distinct masculinities to different geographical locations. Rather, it will consider stories of early school leaving and employment in the accounts of boys from regional locations who chose to leave school early.

This paper concerns itself with a perceived (and for some individuals, a real) risk attributed by society to those boys who do not finish their secondary schooling. The risk directly centers on the long-term ramifications for those boys who leave school early, and who may not have the resources to cope in the workforce. On a broad scale,

the paper will identify aspects of educational discourses taken up by non-completing boys in different locations in order to 'make sense' of their decision to leave school.

Method

As 'work in progress' this paper will provide a general overview of evidence gathered from twenty-two non-completing boys from three different geographical locations in Queensland. This study is part of a larger longitudinal 3 year project entitled "*Factors affecting boys' engagement with schooling at the Secondary level*" co-managed between Education Queensland and James Cook University under an Australian Research Council, Industry partnership (ARC/SPIRT) agreement. A total of 350 interviews were gathered over the past two and a half years for the ARC/SPIRT project, of which twenty-two interviews were recorded with non-completing boys for this study. This study seeks to investigate how boys' early school leaving may be linked to boys' decision-making processes and discourses of masculinities from three distinct geographical locations.

The interview questions invited the non-completing boys to share their general experiences of school. Specific points of interest included the influence that peers, teachers and parents had on their academic performance, participation in activities, subject choice, post-school pathways, and any other factors that may have influenced their decision to leave school. Some questions were designed to specifically explore the boys' current feelings about having left school and being employed in the workforce.

The choice of secondary schools was primarily driven by the design study of the ARC/SPIRT project. Two schools from each geographical location of provincial, metropolitan and rural were chosen that met the project's design. Pseudonyms have been allocated to the schools. The two rural schools are referred to as Mitcham and Listerfield; the provincial schools as Heatherdale and Blackburn; and the metropolitan schools as Laburnum and Ashwood. Aspects that required consideration included a range of different geographical locations, the size of the local State High school, the number of male students in Years 10, 11 and 12 in the local State High school, the willingness of the boys and their parents to participate in the ARC/SPIRT project, and the 1999 Socio-Economic Index For Areas[ii] (SEIFA) for schools in Queensland provided by the Australian Bureau of Statistics for Education Queensland. The names of the non-completing boys were provided by each school and contacted by the researcher for interview. Of the 38 names provided, 22 were able to be contacted and agreed to be interviewed.

The research questions focused on how non-completing boys constructed their views of schooling, education, employment, and the destinies they see for themselves, and how these are possibly linked to discourses of masculinity. In analysing the boys' constructions, the study examines how boys who leave school early are positioned within the school-based and non school-based discourses made available to them through local cultures. This paper reports the storylines (Bruner, 1990) or voices, as identified from their narratives, of the twenty-two non-completing boys interviewed from three distinct geographical locations in Queensland. Bruner's concept of 'story'

and 'storylines' is a useful tool in understanding the ways in which the boys position themselves in their narratives and ultimately 'make sense' of their experiences within and removed from their school context. The paper will discuss the 'generative themes' (Friere, 1972) embedded within the non-completing boys' storylines on their school experience and employment in the workforce.

Through the adoption of poststructuralist principles of text deconstruction (Derrida, 1991), data were analysed using tools of positioning (the constitutive 'other') and common binary sets found in the boys' storylines (Davies, 1993; Weedon, 1987). The notion of binaries is a conceptual framework that was developed in order to understand how discourse operates. The basis for binary analysis is the general pattern of the 'first' (ideal construction) being offset by an 'other' which, through a form of negative differentiation helps to constitute the first position (Davies, 1993; Weedon, 1987). This process of positioning enables a clearer understanding of how boys' identities are continuously constituted and negated as a set of social and cultural premises. Through boys' positioning of school as the 'other', we are able to gain insight into factors that influenced their decision to leave school. We are able to understand what they deemed to be important when considering the discursive resources they privilege as they construct their masculine identities.

The non-completing boys had much to say when asked about their experiences at school, and the initial thematic analyses of the transcripts indicate that common themes are evident. Dominant themes that emerged from the boys' narratives, apart from their dislike of school, included a feeling of powerless and helplessness within

the wider schooling system (Archer, Pratt, Phillips, 2001; Gilbert and Gilbert, 1998; Smyth, Hattam, Cannon, Edwards, Wilson and Wurst, 2001; Reay, 2002; Trent and Slade, 2001) and that their decision to leave school was part of a lengthy complicated process. Most indicated feelings of bitterness about the (mis)use of power and authority vested in teachers and that teachers subscribed to a 'put-up with what I'm saying, or shut-up' attitude when working with students; most students claimed that teachers showed little care and were inattentive towards student individual learning needs. A high number of non-completers claimed they were happy with their decision to leave school, although a few voiced regret for deciding to leaving school early. This paper will in the main, explore the generative theme through which the boys provide justification for leaving school.

Justifying leaving school

All non-completers interviewed provided a justification for their decision to leave school. A variety of reasons were given, most based on a belief that life outside school offered more and was somehow 'better'. The boys all present with a kind of logic behind their rationale for not completing school, set against a reality that they constitute the minority of boys in each of their geographical locations who did not finish Year 12. Central to each of their justifications were differing claims that attending school did not assist them in achieving the job they wanted, or that they believed they were essentially positioned as victims of a larger, institutionalized system. Ultimately, leaving school when they did appeared to be the most logical choice for their futures. When asked why they left school when they did, a popular response was that:

> I got offered a job [which was] easy access into the workforce, so I left.
> (Andrew, Mitcham)

> I left school to start the job I wanted to do early, rather than stay at Year 11 and 12, when [Years 11 and 12] may not help me [get a job].
> (Ben, Blackburn)

> I thought I would rather be working and getting money than staying at school. So I got myself a job that I wanted and then left [school].
> (Richard, Ashwood)

> I reckon if I did Year 11 and 12 I would be more stressed and really, I don't need Year 12 'cause a job [came] up in the area that I want to do so I left.
> (Mark, Mitcham)

Based on these boys' accounts, the opportunity of aligning themselves with their ideal construction of 'work' ie. non school-based, by taking up employment opportunities outside of school provided an opportune and legitimate excuse to leave school. It appears that these boys had deemed Year 11 and 12 as providing little if any advantage towards securing their chosen career, so when certain employment opportunities arose in their local community especially ones in their chosen career, they leapt at the opportunity as opposed to letting it pass.

According to the following exchanges, the boys appeared to find school-based discursive practices of teachers a challenge to cope with on a daily basis. It appears that they held teachers responsible for their level of learning, school behaviour, and ultimate decision to leave school. When asked why they left school, they said:

> Basically, I just didn't learn enough, like I didn't learn anything and the teachers weren't nice or anything … it was just hard to cope there so I said 'bugger it', I'll leave and get a job.
> (Brendan, Mitcham)

> I reckon I would have only lasted another day [at school] if that. I would have been expelled 'cause Mr. Smith said to me that [I'm] in too much trouble and that I can either leave now and try and get some work in life and then come back and start Year 11, or get expelled … so I said 'see ya' and got a job.
> (Peter, Listerfield)

> I just had enough of everything like the work and [teachers] pushing me around and stuff like that … something snapped and I [realized how much school] really annoyed me … so I left and got a job.
> (Simon, Heatherdale)

According to Peter, Brendan and Simon, and other boys like them, learning at school appeared to be too difficult in numerous areas for them to achieve forms of individual and/or schooling success. Certain aspects of schooling such as the power and authority vested in teachers (and their apparent (mis)use of them) appeared to be central to their negative experiences and their decision to leave school. Clearly, these boys positioned school as the 'other' and by the taking up discourses, specifically non school-based discourses of employment, they were able to escape the negative experience that was for them, school.

Josh provides an illustration of the logic behind his decision to leave school. When asked why he left school, he said:

> I pretty well had a job lined up and I wasn't learning what I needed to learn [at school] to get into the job force, so I thought it would be best to go and get started early. [Some students] reckon it's worth going higher up in school than repeating Year 10 and getting better marks ... I got LA's and SA's[iii] in Year 10, and [the school] keeps putting you up, but when you go up you lose your marks, so when you get to Year 12 your marks are pretty bad, so you'd be better off having a lower grade with higher marks than a high grade with bad marks, that's how I look at it so I left. (Josh, Mitcham)

Josh claims that faced with competing discourses of academic and employment success, he was doomed to produce "pretty bad" marks in Year 11 and 12 that he believed would disadvantage his future chances of securing employment in his geographical context. By leaving school at Year 10 with a certificate reflecting overall higher marks, he positions himself as a viable option to potential employers, as opposed to presenting a Year 12 certificate reflecting poor academic levels. In this manner Josh is able to 'make sense' of his decision to repeat Year 10 and eventually leave school, and believes that, under the circumstances, this was the best thing to do to help himself for his future. This kind of logic, illustrating the taking up of opportunities external to school to present oneself at one's best was notable in most contexts and shared by other boys in different ways.

Other boys found leaving school provided an opportunity to better themselves in different ways. Some said:

> I've got a job and I've got money that means that I can actually afford to go to TAFE and do my Year 11 and 12... I will study English and Maths [at TAFE] and get better marks for [them] so I can get a better job for my future. ... It's funny, now that I've

left school, I'm working harder to get back to school and get the high grades and that … [I just want to] go back [to school] and improve on everything I do.
(Max, Listerfield)

I can take my time and grow up a bit without feeling stressed [at school].
(Andrew, Mitcham)

Why stay at school as a senior and get bad marks when you're just failing everything, what's the point?… [I thought] I'll get more experience … working out in the real world, if you know what I mean.
(Simon, Heatherdale)

The issues boys were presented by some boys are different in nature from those put forward by others. The following boys provide interesting reasons why they chose to leave school. They claimed that:

[I was] sick and tired of all the immature people at school … that's the reason why I really left. Like the Year 8s are coming up, trying to start a fight with me and stuff, I don't know what for, [he] smashed me in the face and then decides he's going to hoke up a golly and spit it in my face too, and I just couldn't take it after that, and I just threw him around a bit and smashed him … those situations like that just happened all the time, I was just sick and tired of it. [I had been] suspended heaps of times for fighting, but it is because I am so big (6ft.7"), they took at me as a target, 'if we knock him down then we'll look big and tough and no-one else will bother us … I just had a gutful of it.
(Shane, Ashwood).

[There were] just too many fights at Laburnum High and the people just don't get along well with others. … I was pushed into a fight and got suspended … I just had to get out.
(Daniel, Laburnum)

> I think it was the drugs …[and] wagging school. This was going on all the time, but then I got to the stage where I didn't have the money to buy pot, so I just [kept] wagging school anyway. It was the peer pressure and the drugs. I think if I didn't get into drugs at school, I would have stayed.
> (Richard, Ashwood)

My reading is that an important underlying factor behind all the boys' justifications for leaving school is a desire to be judged by others as having done the 'right thing'. If the boys' experiences of school did occur, who could blame Richard for leaving school early to escape the school drug scene, or for Shane and Daniel leaving school to escape the school-based violence? Or the other boys who left school to pursue employment in their chosen career, who would also argue that faced with a choice of staying at school or taking up an opportunity to start their career early, their decision was sensible and in their best interest. For example, Simon from Heatherdale explains how his peers reacted to the decision of him leaving school. When asked what his peers thought on being told that he was leaving school to start work, he said:

> Nothing really.
> *Did they care, or try to talk you out of [leaving school]?*
> No, 'cause I was going and doing something with my life, I wasn't just going to be sitting around.
> *What do you mean?*
> Well if you leave [school] and you just do nothing then they'd tell you that you're not doing the right thing, but if you are going and doing something, then they don't seem to say anything to you.
> (Heatherdale, Simon)

These excerpts illustrate the variety of competing discourses available for boys to negotiate and ultimately 'make sense' of their decision to leave school. It is evident

that most boys positioned school as the 'other', effectively indicating their apparent inability to abide by school-based discourses requiring a respect of authority, institutional rules and discipline.

Remorse for leaving school

As we have seen, at the time of leaving school it appeared that all boys felt leaving was the best decision they could make for their future. However, having spent some time out in the work place, some boys did indicate feelings of regret at leaving school when they did. It appears that for some boys, if they had their time at school over again, they would perhaps view a decision to leave school differently. For example, when asked if leaving school was the best thing for them to do, some comments were:

> No, probably not the best thing.
> *In what way wasn't it the best thing?*
> That I'm not in that good of a job now. I could have stayed at school and gone out and been what I wanted to be, like a carpenter or something. Just for the job, the standard of job you get, I reckon if you had a Year 12 you'd get a better job. Yeah, being out of school, having to work and that [is a lot harder than school] ... I didn't really have a good think about [leaving school]. You see if I had've got Year 10 I still would have been able to get a trade, go out and still be able to get into TAFE and that. See I haven't got Year 10 so I can't really go into TAFE and get a trade ... I shouldn't have left.
> (Brian, Ashwood)

> Nope.
> *Why?*
> Oh it's hard. Its hard work getting money, you just think of the money, you just think of the money.
> *Is it as hard as staying at school?*

It's hard, like working hard, school you can just block out.

So what is so hard about getting out into the real world?

I don't know, [being] self-reliant. It's hard going from Mum driving you to school everyday to having to get to work yourself.

(Peter, Listerfield)

I actually wished I'd stayed now.

Really why was that?

I dunno, I just wish I had finished my youth ... It's hard to actually look in that crystal ball and see what would be the right thing to do ... I just think it was the best opportunity for me at the time. Now when I look back on [leaving school] I wish I had've stayed.

(Richard, Ashwood)

No. I don't think doing anything early is good...I dunno, [I was] stupid.

(Shane, Ashwood)

When the boys were asked, based on their experience of leaving school and being employed, whether they would recommend to their friends to do the same, we gain another insight into the level of regret they share for leaving school. Some comments were:

I have a lot of friends who think 'Oh I hate school, I hate school,' but I just keep telling them to stay, stay the whole time.

(Richard, Ashwood)

Some [people I would recommend to leave school]... some that just bludge, they do nothing

What would you say to those people?

Leave, stop wasting everyone's time and that. They don't turn up to class and that, and if they do turn up to school, they just sit there and bludge.

(Simon, Heatherdale)

> I'd just say it's up to them really, I wouldn't pressure them to leave, 'cause I liked the fact that I left, but I also wished I sort of stayed and had the education and that I would have had at school ... so I'd tell them to stick it out while [they're] there.
> *How are your mates who have left school going?*
> Well ... most of them I've seen are getting on well ... doing just what young boys do, just try[ing to] get a car, trying to get a job, and pretty well just trying to get their life together.
> (Brendan, Mitcham)
>
> [I'd tell my friends to] try and stay at school, get a good education so they can better themselves.
> (Shane, Ashwood)

It appears for Brendan, the decision to leave school was not an easy one, as he implies he could have been talked out of leaving school, and in some ways, wished he had. It is interesting to note that whilst Brendan acknowledges he may have missed out on gaining further education by leaving school, he still reassures himself of the appropriateness of his decision by referring to some of his friends who also left school, and the fact that they were 'getting on well' and appear not to be disadvantaged in any way. My reading is that for Brendan and other boys like him, despite regarding their school experiences to be generally negative, they appear to acknowledge and appreciate the arduous task ahead of them trying to 'get a car, trying to get a job, and pretty well just trying to get their life together' (Brendan, Mitcham).

Whilst still at school and apparently entertaining romantic notions of being employed, enjoying a 'freedom' of sorts by earning money and being viewed as an adult, most non-completers would not recommend leaving school to their friends. A high number of boys interviewed appear to have entered the work force with an ideal construction

that paid work was an improvement from schoolwork in many ways. However, for the majority of boys, their experience of the reality of being employed proved to be in conflict with their initial construction of paid work. This realization, for many, appeared to be at the center of a new set of feelings, feelings of uncertainty, insecurity and doubt that I will now explore.

Aimlessness

In addition to expressing their feelings of regret for leaving school when they did, some boys also shared a sense of aimlessness and implied that success in their on-going future employment appeared to depend very much on chance. Most boys, having found themselves in menial, low-paying and base-grade jobs, questioned the likelihood of experiencing employment at a higher classification in their future. When the boys were asked to comment on how they viewed their future employment prospects having left school early, some comments were:

> I don't know, I just let [life] go as it goes.
> (Josh, Mitcham)

> [I] wouldn't have a clue [where to find a good job]. I'll go through the paper I suppose.
> (Andrew, Mitcham)

> [When I think about what I can to do for a job] I just don't know, my mind just goes blurry.
> (Brendan, Mitcham)

> I don't know [what I can see myself doing]. I don't know what there is after this.
> (Peter, Listerfield)

> I don't know what is going to happen... I really don't know. Yeah, I think I'll just take the days as they come. Just whatever happens, happens.
> (Richard, Ashwood)

> I've got my Year 10 certificate ... at least now I'll be able to do some things. But I don't know what I can do. I do know [that] if I didn't have [my Year 10], I couldn't do squat.
> (Shane, Ashwood)

What appears to be common to these boys cited is a sense of loss associated with a distinct lack of future direction and planning; a sense that their future will control them, rather than them controlling their future. I detect hints of apathy, loneliness and fear as they embark on an unknown future in an increasingly demanding world. This sense of loss and aimlessness was evident in all areas, particularly notable in the rural regions. Likely explanations may center on the fact that employment options in those two areas are distinctly 'closed' in that the towns' employment prospects are dominated by mining or agricultural trading (sugar-cane and banana harvesting). Competition for employment is high, compounded by the reality that working in those areas simply may not interest some boys. For those boys who aspire to engage in different forms of work other than mining or agricultural-based services, the future employment prospects in their geographical location may look decidedly narrow and uninviting. However, this appeared not to be the case for all non-completers. According to some boys, they reported experiencing decidedly positive outcomes from their decision to leave school that I will now explore.

Advantages of leaving school

Illustrating the boys' positioning of their ideal construction of non-school based 'work', the following excerpts are examples of the shared sentiment by the boys when asked how they considered themselves 'better off' by leaving school. Some non-completers provided interesting claims as to the advantages they gained by leaving school. Some comments were:

> Get[ting] a job, a car, money ... [and] hav[ing] some confidence that [I'm] going somewhere, instead of sitting at school learning and not know[ing] where [I'm] going to go. I'm going to start [work] early ... I'll have a job and everyone else will be coming out of Year 12 thinking, Oh, what shall I do?
> (Brendan, Mitcham)

> Making money, I'm learning stuff, I'm getting experience ... it feels like I'm going somewhere.
> (Simon, Heatherdale)

> Just having an earlier start in life ... just that it would really be a waste of two years if I stayed at school 'cause I wasn't learning. If I can already get the job that I want even if I'm still at school, then why not? ... by the time everybody else has finished school, I'll already be a qualified Chef.
> (Josh, Listerfield)

> See that [motor]bike out there? I wouldn't have that if I was still at school.
> (Peter, Listerfield)

> I had a lot of time to do some more study, specifically, not just with computers but with telecommunications and audio-visual, absolutely none of that was taught at Laburnum.
> (David, Laburnum)

We see how these boys position employment in the work force, as their ideal of what *real* work should be. It appears that most boys felt that entering the work place symbolized an opportunity for them to regain control over their lives and their individual decision-making processes. They seem to share a view that leaving school and joining the workforce provided an advantageous head start for their future, reinforcing the 'othered' nature of the educational credential of a Year 12 certificate. They claim they were able to learn practical, *real* skills that could be applied directly to their current employment requirements, thereby linking the relevance of their learning to its application. According to these boys, leaving school has provided positive short and long term goals that they claim would not otherwise have been experienced at school. I think it is important to note that these boys reported that experiencing some form of contentment that their decision to leave school when they did was the right one.

In summary

Commonalities exist across the transcripts of the non-completers. The complexity of the boys' constructions of schooling is evident from the narratives of the non-completing boys. There appears to be a disparity between boys' ideal schooling constructions and their experienced schooling reality; analysis of their narratives illustrates how antithetical their relationship is to each other. Evident through the interview transcripts was a common theme of disaffiliation with school and the negative impact most boys perceived teachers had on their school experiences in general, reflecting similar findings among other studies (Archer et al. 2001; Smyth et al, 2001; Trent & Slade, 2001; Wexler, 1992).

Some boys often remarked on an unwillingness to accept some strictures, constraints and disciplines of school, and a number discussed how school failed to provide relevance and meaning in their schooling context. A shared sentiment about the boys' school experience is echoed by research that asserts that most non-completers feel misunderstood and 'let down' by the institution of school as a whole (Archer, et al 2001; Smyth et al. 2001; Trent and Slade, 2001). In absence of a 'space' to enunciate their dissatisfaction with schooling, the non-completing boys take up a variety of discourses underpinned by views about the irrelevance and insignificance of schooling. This variety in some cases seemed to be related to differences across regional contexts.

Trent and Slade (2001) from their research concur and concluded that having boys stay at school when they wish to leave:

> further compounds the paradoxical dilemma of education for boys, namely that they have to stay in a place that they believe they can't stay in, doing work that they believe is of no value, in order to get qualifications that they believe do not accurately measure their ability, but which they will need if they are to get the chance to demonstrate their real ability to learn 'on the job'. (Trent and Slade, 2001, p. 40)

This paper has shown how boys who leave school draw from distinctive features of schooling and non-schooling discourses to 'make sense' of their decision to leave school. Essentially, this constant construction of boys' masculine identities is part of a much larger process of successfully negotiating the multiple masculine identities

required to navigate their way through the many different social contexts that constitute their daily lives. This has implications for the cultural context in which they are living and for future schooling and education policy.

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[i] The Apparent Retention Rate shows the number of students who remain in Year 12 as a percentage of the number in that cohort who started secondary school the relevant number of years previously.

[ii] This measure is used by the Bureau of Statistics as an indicator of socio-economic status of individuals/families. The values for the SEIFA index are derived from the Index of Relative Socio-Economic Disadvantage (IRSED) based upon 1996 Census data, and 1998 school catchments and enrolments.

[iii]

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